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 Proper 28 C: Luke 21:5-9
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When? Now

Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem and are standing outside the Temple. People are admiring the amazing building, adorned with beautiful stones. Ancient historian Josephus said that it was “covered on all sides with massive plates of gold.” When the sun shone directly on it people “were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the rays of the sun.” From afar it looked, he said, “like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.”ⁱ It was spectacular, designed to convey the awesome majesty of God.

It's this holy Temple of God that everyone is admiring when Jesus speaks up and says aloud, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And I can just imagine the high priests and the elders of the temple rushing to an open window and calling out, “Shh Jesus! Quiet down! We're trying to do a stewardship campaign in here! We need a new driveway, and you're all, ‘none of this is going to be here someday anyway.’ Knock it off with all the doom and gloom!”

Okay, so that's not what actually happened. But Jesus' words do raise the issue of the future – the future, and what is permanent in the long run. What really endures? What endures through trial and tribulation, through disasters human-made and movements of nature that are disastrous for humans? And if it's not holy places and beloved buildings, why do we bother with them? I'll come back to that question. But first, let's go back to what really happened with the disciples.

When Jesus told the disciples that someday the temple would be destroyed, their response was not, “no way,” or “I guess our deferred maintenance is really getting out of hand” It was “when?” When will this happen? And they asked, because they knew it had happened before. They knew that the temple that existed in the time of Jesus was actually the Second Temple. The first Temple, built by King Solomon had been utterly destroyed in the year 586 BCE when the Babylonians invaded, took the people off to exile and left the temple a heap of rubble.

Before Solomon, when his father, King David had originally asked God if he, David, could build a temple God told him, “No.” God had always had a simpler house of worship, a tent, a place that was portable, that could travel with the people and remind the people that God goes with them anywhere and everywhere. There would be no one place where they could pretend that God resides there, and that once a week, you can go to God’s house for awhile, and when you’re done, you can leave and close the door on God and go about your regular business. No – God’s house was a tent that can be folded up and carried with the people as they travels, a place with walls that were just billowy curtains. A place where the Holy Spirit can blow through anytime was just fine with God. It was as if God was saying, I know how attached you humans get to places, to beautiful places. I don’t want you worshipping the building and forgetting about me. I don’t want you looking at the stones that adorn the temple and forget that I am the solid rock on which you stand, the rock of your salvation, a mighty fortress, a castle to keep you safe, your crag and your stronghold.

But eventually, God told Solomon to build a temple. And he did. And it was beautiful and holy. And it lasted until the Babylonians made war against the Israelites, and then it was no more.

And here is Jesus saying, this temple, this temple too won’t last. Not a stone on stone. “When will it happen?” ask the disciples. What will be the sign?

By the time the gospel of Luke gets written down, some 50 or so years later, the readers of Luke’s gospel have seen it. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 AD, and any Christians must have thought of Jesus’ words when they looked at the Temple lying in rubble, scavengers carting off stones and precious metals.

“When?” ask the disciples, and what will be the sign?

Please notice that Jesus doesn't answer their question of when. He doesn't talk about time except to say that the end would not come immediately. Instead he tells them, don't be led astray. Don't go after people who say they know when. Don't be afraid.

No calendar, no counting-down clock.

But he does tell them some things to look for, a list of terrible, hard things that humans will endure on earth until someday when the end *will* come: wars and earthquakes, famines and plagues, people persecuted for their faith, people betrayed by even their friends and family members. In short, things the early Christian Church experienced first hand, and things that have been going on in the world ever since.

Jesus does not call his disciples – those disciples then or us disciples now – to forecasting. He calls us to faithfulness. He doesn't tell us when. But he tells us how to live, how to use our time in the meantime.

It is significant that rather than signs of an immanent end, Jesus tells us about things in the world around us, things that demand a Christian response. Not forecasting. Faithfulness. Jesus confronts our fears of living in dangerous times. He doesn't promise his followers rescue from the world's distress. Rather, disciples are called to serve in a suffering world, bearing witness to the God who will not let suffering have the last word. Jesus gives us signs, things to be attentive to, not because they help us predict how long we have, but to tell us there is no more important day than the day we now live. The wars, earthquakes, plagues, and persecutions, remind us that there is a need for a witness to God's love, that we can bring God's love to people who hurt, people whose lives are torn apart when nation rises up against nation, or family member against family member, when hurricanes strike or terrorists strike out, when people are hungry and sick, and homeless and refugees.

Jesus gives us signs, but they are not useful for predicting the end. They are useful for showing us where God needs us to be, where God is: among the poor, the lost, the least, the lonely, the weak. Endure in these places. Be faithful to me, says God, even in hard and frightening times. I

am with you, always and everywhere. Keep the faith. Love. Serve. Be bearers of hope. Everywhere. All the time. Endure and you will gain your souls. When? Now.

Jesus knew that God was doing something amazing in him. In Jesus, God was reminding the people, that while the Temple was meant to be a holy place, a place to go to honor God, to be reminded of God's righteousness and justice, God's grandeur and mercy, Jesus would himself be a new kind of temple, a place where people could meet God, could go to learn of the mercy, grace, righteousness, and justice of God.

And even after Jesus had left the earth, the body of Christ is still here, all of us, a living temple, not made by hands or of stone. "Don't you know," the apostle Paul asks, "that you are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in you? . . . God's temple is holy and you are that temple."ⁱⁱ In Ephesians we are told "you are . . . members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God."ⁱⁱⁱ Paul says, even when this earthly dwelling place – our bodies – are "destroyed in death, we have a building from God not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."^{iv} For ever. When is the time for faithfulness? Now? How long will this temple of living stones stand? Forever.

So back to this place, this physical building, this beautiful and beloved house of God. If this is not what really endures to the end, why do we need it?

We need this place and people and programs to nurture the true temple, the temple that is you and me together built on Christ the chief cornerstone, the temple that nothing can tear down or destroy because it is the body of Christ, and even when this earthly version is gone, an eternal one will remain. We need St. Anne's Church so we can be St. Anne's Church, a temple of living stones, not concerned with forecasting, but faithfulness. When? Now.

ⁱ Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.5.6 222-224

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

ⁱⁱⁱ Ephesians 2:19-22

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 5:1